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# **Agentlessness in the hands of professional translation**

## **1. Introduction**

The school of thought revolving round semantic functions of Noun Phrases, which was initiated by Fillmore (1968), has been developed by next generations of linguists (Cruse 2000, Dixon 1991, Downing, Locke 1995). It defines agent as “any entity that is capable of operating on itself or others, usually to bring about some change in the location or properties of itself or others.” (Downing and Locke 1995: 114).

Prototypical agents are human and are characterized by such properties as animacy, intention, motivation, responsibility and the use of one's own energy to cause the event or trigger the process. What actually is of interest of the author of the presentation is the situations where discourse is systematically deprived of agents. What this research focuses on is the constructions where the presence of the agent is precluded.

The aim of this paper and the undertaken research is to answer the question how agentless constructions are perceived and handled when the need to translate them into another language occurs.

Before I concentrate on the research proper, I find it necessary to present the framework for this study, which boils down to introducing the proposed understanding of the terms involved in the survey. Let me in the next section ponder over agentlessness and then devote some time to the characteristics of the corpus collected for the purposes of this study.

## 2. Presentation of the agentless constructions.

The structures under discussion have been labeled in a variety of different ways throughout the history of linguistics (Polański 1993, Karde-la1996). Let me illustrate the phenomenon with uncontroversial, in my opinion, instances of it.

English:

- E.1. passive voice  
The new road has been finally built.
- E.2. impersonal one:  
One would not dream of that.
- E.3. middles:  
This CD sells well.
- E.4. impersonal you  
You will go there and you will get hit in the head.

Polish:

- P.1. passive voice:  
Nowa droga została w końcu zbudowana.
- P.2. impersonal się construction:  
Się pracuje to się ma.
- P.3. middles:  
Ta bluzka pierze się dobrze.
- P.4. secondary impersonality:  
Pójdiesz tam i dostaniesz po głowie
- P.5. a third person sg. neuter verb  
Wybiło szybę.
- P.6. -no, -to constructions:  
Lubiano go i ceniono
- P.7. uninflected modals  
Trzeba znać konie.
- P.8. sensation verbs  
Mdli mnie.

Each of sentences from the above list distinguishes a separate aspect of the phenomenon that is the subject matter of this article. Sentences (1) in both the English and Polish data are examples of passive voice, which is a linguistic device whose primary function is avoiding reference to the agent, which is either unknown or undesirable.

Sentence (2) in the English list illustrates the impersonal construction with *one*. Since there are several uses of the word *one* in English, I shall have to specify that the *one* in question is referred to as the “indefinite one” (in Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik 1991). The same authors claim that *one* means “people in general” with reference to the speaker. In Schibsbye’s (1965:276) opinion “*one* can be an indefinite personal pronoun signifying I and others.” This use of *one* is chiefly formal and is often replaced by the more informal *you*, which will be introduced afterwards. The Polish construction presented with label (2) consists of a verb – 3.sg. with the element *się* which makes it impossible for a “regular” subject to come forth. These syntactic structures are translational equivalents of the German sentences with *man* and the English ones with *one*. *Rozmawia się tu po angielsku. One speaks English here.* That is why they are grouped together.

Two sentences labelled as (3) are instances of middle constructions. Some linguists classify them as notional passives, i.e. as sentences which have passive meaning but whose form lacks the assisting formal marker. The term “middles” is associated with the middle voice, the term that goes back to the Greek distinction between three voices ‘active’, ‘passive’ and ‘middle’. Lyons (1971), Stefański (1990) and Quirk et.al (1991), quoting ancient Grammarians state that the middle was thought of as intermediate between the primary opposition of active and passive. It signified either an “action”, like the active, or a “state”, like the passive, according to the inherent meaning of the verb in question and the circumstances of use.

The English example (4) demonstrates the occurrence of the impersonal construction with *you*, being the less formal counterpart of *one*.

The origin of this use could be traced back by the analogy to the Polish language. Structure (4), which in fact is the translational equivalent of the English structure (4) definitely belongs to colloquial Polish and it resembles a standard utterance directed to the hearer – 2.sg. with a dropped pronoun *ty* ‘you’ sg. This one certainly does not have a trace of agentlessness. The second reading of these sentences is what interests us. That is why these sentences are secondarily impersonal. *Pójdiesz* ‘you will go’ – 2.sg. refers to an indefinite in number group of people including the speaker and the hearer.

Suffixes *-no*, *-to* identify sentences such as (5). The scope of those endings is very widespread. There are very few verbs that are constrained to their application. A verb with such a suffix can never co-occur with a subject and it refers either to a group of people or to one individual different from the speaker and the addressee involved in a past action.

Sentence (6) reveals the occurrence of a group of modal uninflected forms of verbs whose univocal classification is probably impossible. The ending of those modal predicates is fossilized and fitting in a potential subject is unacceptable. Those elements are followed by infinitives.

Polish sentence (7), referring to the sensations of the body represent a unique (from the structural point of view) class of constructions. In sentence (4) *mdli* is a 3.person sg. neuter verb and it is followed by *mnie* which is a personal pronoun of the 1.person sg.Acc. The status of *mnie* is still a contentious matter for some linguists. From the point of view of formality, it meets all the demands of a direct object. A question arises what this thing or phenomenon is that causes the activity denoted by *mdli*. Is there a subject in this structure different than the person who experiences *mdłości* 'sickness', given the fact that it is expressed in Accusative case?

The presentation makes it clear that the array of possible agentless constructions is much wider in Polish than in English.

### 3. Research project

#### 3.1. Aims of the research.

The aim of the undertaken research was to examine how agentlessness is perceived and handled by professional translators. The choice of the topic was dictated by a number of reasons. First of all, agentless called also impersonal constructions are the subject matter of the professional interest of the author. Secondly, the author has observed that there is a certain gap in the contrastive translational studies. A lot is done on equivalence, but the emphasis is laid on lexis, strategies and translational techniques are lavishly exploited and this is the perspective they offer. What the studies seem to be deficient in is the detailed analysis of the way certain controversial syntactic structures are rendered in another language.

The constructions in question are the agentless ones and the languages involved are : English as the point of departure and Polish as the target one. Bearing in mind prior observations, which resulted from extensive insight into the journalistic communication with special emphasis laid on the constructions avoiding direct reference, the researcher decided to focus on the language of the press.

### 3.2. Research procedure

When it comes to professional translations of the journalese there is a unique magazine on the Polish press market, namely *Forum*. It offers translations of the most interesting articles of the world's press. It is a weekly magazine and it has been in circulation continuously since 1965. It has been an invaluable source of insight into high quality information about what is happening in the world for someone who does not have a command of any foreign language. Selected articles from the March and April 2008 editions of *Forum* have been combined with their original versions. The assembled corpus underwent a meticulous analysis. Sentences marked for agentlessness perceived as defined above have been singled out from the English texts and their equivalents taken from the recognised translations provided by the team of *Forum* have been matched then calculated, categorized and assessed. The articles chosen for the analysis come from both British and American press. The British texts encompass articles from 'The Guardian' (*There is racism but not in public, Freedom lost, Brilliantly drawn girls, The end of the line, The fear factor. Tipping points, The tyranny of pink.*) and 'The Times' (*Changing face of war, Mills and McCartney: the farce.*) The American ones come from 'The Washington Post' (*On the trail of the cat, scientists find surprise*) 'The LA Times' (*Nouvel wins the 2008 Pritzker Architecture Prize*) 'The Wilson Quarterly' (*Bath and body works*).

The articles are of the editorial column length, which means one or two page long. This amounts on the average to texts comprising from 44 to 134 sentences each. The articles deal with versatile themes (racism in South Africa, perception of personal cleanliness over the centuries, Iraq war, punctuation, i.e. semi – colon from the philosophical perspective, tipping habits in various nations or the pink mania for the little girls) therefore no attempts at semantic grouping of verbs occurring in the analysed texts have been made.

### 3.3. Research results and discussion

**Table1. Selected constructions from “The Guardian” *Tipping Points***

„Switzerland, and you only need to round up the bill”	„Szwajcaria, gdzie można tylko zaokrąglić sumę rachunku”	impersonal you->uninflected modal
„fly to Denmark, where no extra at all is expected”	„polecieć do Danii, gdzie nie oczekuje się ani grosza”	passive voice->impersonal się construction
„it was duly explained to me that waiters got peanuts”	„wy tłumaczono mi, że kelnerzy pracują tam za marne grosze”	passive voice->-no,-to construction
„an 18% gratitude will be added to their bill”	„do rachunku doliczamy 18-procentowy napiwek”	passive voice->active voice
„the slip has the line marked ‘Tip’ still left open”	„linijka ‘napiwek’ pozostaje (...) niewypełniona”	passive voice-> passive voice
„You really can’t get away with under 20% these days”	„Dziś nie da się wykręcić od napiwku mniejszego niż 20 procent”	impersonal you->impersonal się construction
„You only gain when you serve”	„napiwek należy się temu, kto obsługuje klientów”	impersonal you->impersonal się construction
„you must pay back seven years of illegal sharing”	„Sieć kawiarni będzie musiała zapłacić za to, że przez siedem lat jej kierownictwo przywłaszczało sobie część zarobków (...)”	impersonal you-> active voice
„Americans tip waiters because they are paid so little”	„Amerykanie płacą napiwki kelnerom nie z powodu ich niskich zarobków”	passive voice->nominalization
„They are paid so little because they can expect to make up the difference in tips”	„Kelnerzy zarabiają tak mało, ponieważ mogą liczyć na to, że nadrobią różnicę dzięki napiwkom”	passive voice->active voice
„How often, in Britain, do you find anything from 10% to 15% added (...)?”	„W Wielkiej Brytanii rachunek, do którego dopisano już 10–15 procent za obsługę (...)”	impersonal you->-no,-to construction
„If you set foot across the Channel, you know that all bets are off again”	„Wiesz, że po drugiej stronie kanału wszystko może ci się przytrafić”	impersonal you->secondary impersonality

First quantitative results. Independently of the length of the article agentless constructions represented around 30 % of all the sentences. Let me make allowances for the cases where a sentence contained two exponents of agentlessness (impersonal *you* and passive voice). The question was whether that should be calculated as a single occurrence or double. Another source of problems was the common practice of the Forum editors to leave out considerable chunks of texts in the translated, i.e. Polish versions of the articles. It lead to certain inaccuracies in the statistical part of the research but it did not change the overall picture showing that agentless constructions constitute around one third of the discourse in the gathered corpus.

This, to some extent, is in accordance with the tendencies in the English language. The research results quoted in Gramley, Pätzhold (1992: 247) inform that “the frequency of passives among the total finite verb forms” is somewhere between 26–46% depending on the cited study. Gramley, Pätzhold (1992) quote the occurrence of passive constructions, which beyond doubt comprises the largest part of what is understood as agentless constructions but we must not overlook the fact that all types of impersonal structures have been located in the assembled corpus. Table 1, which is a randomly selected excerpt of the overall analysis, demonstrates the strategies employed by the translators handling agentlessness. The sample in the table is not representative. The sentences and their translational equivalents have been deliberately singled out to present the entire array of alternatives existing in the studied corpus. Beyond doubt, passive voice overshadows quantitatively all the other instances of agentlessness. But impersonal constructions with *you* or *one* constitute a substantial number as well. Locating *you* before *one* is not inadvertent either. The research showed that impersonal *one* is scarcely represented in the texts, which confirms my earlier observations<sup>1</sup> that impersonal *you* has almost exclusively taken over the position of *one* and only linguistics and grammar books do not seem to recognise the fact and continue lecturing that *you* is the informal variant of *one*. The corpus also contains rare instances of middle constructions (*Pink sells* ‘*Różowy kolor dobrze się sprzedaje*’).

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<sup>1</sup> The study which has been referred to as ‘my earlier observations’ was based on the corpus of British written texts that came from the CDs issued by “The Guardian” 1992 – the annual encompassing 27747272 words; “The Times” 1993 – annual encompassing 38978316 words and “The Daily Telegraph” 1993 – the annual encompassing 33770457 words.



The analysis of the Polish translations coming from Forum allows to make certain inferences. Polish equivalents of the English passive sentences are *-no, -to* (42%) constructions, which is surprisingly low especially when you realize that passive voice equivalents comprise 30% of the total. The residual values are distributed among active voice (12%), uninflected modal predicates (8%), impersonal *się* construction (5%) and finally nominalizations (3%).

English impersonal constructions with *you*, in which the texts abounded were translated into Polish with a considerable regularity. Seventy-two % of their translational counterparts are the impersonal *się* constructions, which fact adds to the discussion over the status of *się*<sup>2</sup>. The remaining, marginal cases are allocated among uninflected modal predicates (12%), active voice (10%) and nominalizations (6%).

To conclude, it needs to be stressed that some findings obtained from the research have been utterly unanticipated. The fact that the proportion of agentless constructions is roughly identical in all the collected articles and it amounts to 30% could not be a mere coincidence.

I have a suspicion that editorial columns among many other distinguishing properties are characterized by a specific rate of agentlessness. I would risk a thesis that specific journalistic genres have varying degrees of agentless markedness. In my opinion, this state of affairs requires a wide – ranging treatment on a considerably larger scale.

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<sup>2</sup> There is a group of linguists (Netteberg 1953; Wierzbicka 1966; Saloni 1975), who advocate considering this particular use of *się* as a subject of the sentence.

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